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ABSTRACT

The use of questions in the target language on reading material is an important teaching aid in developing a working command of the spoken language in introductory FL courses. The best use of reading material in the early stages of second language acquisition is as an aid to communicating in the target language. Consequently, reading material should be chosen not for the literary value or relevance of its content but for the simplicity of its vocabulary and grammatical structures. Questions about reading should be based on the need for structural manipulation of the language, rather than on teaching the content. A demonstration of the question-asking procedure using an introductory German text illustrates the quantity and variety of questions that can be constructed on the basis of a short passage. These questions involve transformations, forcing the student to create new sentences in answering, and can serve to teach verb endings, usage of adverbials, and other difficult German structures. The use of such questions in the teaching of a second language should serve as a transitional stage between learning basic grammatical structures and using the language in conversation. (LG)

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Asking the Right Questions in FL Instruction: Why, When, How

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Asking questions in the target language ought to be an important teaching device used by every foreign language teacher who considers speaking and listening comprehension essential aspects of foreign language learning. It is rather puzzling then that the recently published and widely praised anthology of articles on the teaching of German (Reichmann 1970) does not devote one entire article to the use of questions. The space taken up by this topic in the four articles which do mention it amounts to little more than one page. The reason for this conspicuous neglect apparently is that the anthology is quite representative of the topics that can be found in the critical literature on the teaching of German. Reichmann is fully cognizant of this unfortunate state of affairs:

> Regrettably, our methods books do not treat the <u>question of the question</u> beyond some basic considerations, thus leaving the teacher candidate more or less unaware of the central role of the question in the instructional process (Reichmann 1970: 183).

With this article I hope to encourage further discussion and research and to offer a practical aid for teachers on the use of questions.

As its title suggests, this paper is intended to address itself to both the theory and practice of asking questions, in foreign language instruction. But there is an important limitation on the scope of this article not alluded

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to in the title: I will be considering almost exclusively the use of questions on reading material in the early stages of second language acquisition and will be concerned only with that type of classroom instruction which has as at least one of its objectives the teaching of an active use or a working command of the spoken language.[1] The focus here will be chiefly on the first four courses of college German, but with the necessary adjustments, the discussion could be made applicable both to the learning of any foreign language and to instruction on the high school level.

Although the anthology includes a greater amount of discussion on the teaching of reading than on question-asking, it reflects the prevailing assumption among foreign language teachers that at all levels of instruction the use of reading material has essentially the same overall purpose. This purpose is implied by Reichmann in one of his suggestions for classroom procedure (Reichmann 1970: 175):

> Stimulate a favorable attitude toward the content and have a definite purpose for reading it. In teaching reading the arousal of an interest in the content is half the work.

I want to question the view expressed here and suggest instead that the purpose of reading in the beginning stages of foreign language learning should be quite different from that of reading in the advanced courses and in one's native language; Reichmann's emphasis on content is appropriate only to the latter.

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There is no need to emphasize the content in the early stages, for if the students read the assigned material at all they read it for its content, since this is precisely what they have been taught to do for years in most of their other courses, which deal with subject matter in their native language. I will argue that the best use of reading material in the early courses is as an aid to the acquisition of the target language as a means of communication. For this purpose the kinds of questions asked should be decidedly different from those that are asked in advanced courses and in courses taught in the students' native language, where an understanding and assimilation of the content is presumably the main purpose of reading.

Specifically, I will demonstrate and discuss a question-asking procedure that is meant to serve as a bridge or transitional stage between the learning and practicing of the basic grammatical structures and the use of the foreign language in free conversation. As perhaps every German teacher knows, students who can perform almost perfectly on textbook drills dealing, for example, with the use of the dative or accusative after certain prepositions, often exhibit no awareness of the correct rule in producing sentences spontaneously. The procedure suggested here is meant to supplement the grammar explanations and various kinds of drills which necessarily occupy an integral part of grammar textbooks and classroom

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instruction, but which by themselves do not allow for the genuine creation of novel sentences and therefore no real active control over or internalization of the grammar.

But first it is necessary to say something about the vexed problem of the choice of reading material. Most teachers are hesitant to use graded or "bowdlerized" material, or stories considered to have inferior literary quality with adults, because it is assumed that the content would not sufficiently challenge, inspire and motivate the students. As a consequence, the students are usually presented with an intellectual content that is approximately on a par with that of their non-foreign language courses, but which also contains excessively difficult vocabulary and grammatical structures. The students are then forced to spend a great deal of time puzzling out the structure and finding English equivalents instead of using that part of the language which they can control.[2] The solution to the problem is to select material not on the basis of its literary value, cultural significance or intrinsic relevant content, but rather for its suitability as an aid to creative language learning. The relatively sparse material available which does offer both challenging content and simple language should of course be considered a boon but not essential to successful beginning language instruction.

It is true that the students will become quickly disenchanted if the objectives of the course and the purpose of the reading are not understood by the teacher and/or not

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explained to the students. Most teachers are so far beyond their students in their control of the target language and thus in their reading and research that they tend to forget how exciting the learning of a foreign language (especially the first one) for its own sake can be,[3] so that they choose reading material which <u>they</u> find interesting and challenging in content. On the other hand, the students may be insulted (subconsciously perhaps) by content which seems to be below their level of intelligence, unless it is made very clear to them that in the beginning the challenge lies more in an active use of the language and in the discovery of how language works than in wrestling with new ideas.

The questions which accompany most annotated readers also indicate the same purpose of reading as that discussed above. They are designed primarily to check whether the students have grasped the content and significance of the material read, so that many of the questions ask for interpretation or explanation and are therefore not much different from those that students would be confronted with in their English Literature classes, for example. In trying to respond to such questions the students naturally feel frustrated because they do not have the structure and vocabulary available to them that they do in their native language, in which their natural inclination would be to use a great variety of linguistic devices such as various dependent clauses, pronominalization, counterfactuals,

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indirect discourse, nominalization, deletion, etc.[4] In answer to other questions students can simply lift out whole sentences without actually making any contribution of their own.

As an alternative I suggest that the students be told explicitly that a gradual transition to such questions is necessary and that they will consequently be asked hundreds of (basic information) questions of the kind they are not accustomed to in their other courses and that many of the questions may seem trite or even stupid in contrast, that is, when judged on the basis of their reference to content. But the answers to these questions will not be trivial because they will almost always require some sort of structural change contributed by the student.

I want to stress very strongly that by encouraging a de-emphasis of the content I do not mean that we should not be concerned with the meaning of the sentences and passages read, the questions asked or the answers given. That is, I do not mean to support the simple parroting and memorizing without reference to meaning which was apparently practiced by strong proponents of the audio-lingual method. In this respect I endorse the arguments presented by T. Grant Brown (1971, 1972) and H. Douglas Brown (1972) who point out that class instruction on grammar frequently puts too much weight on the learning of low-level morphological rules and on rote

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learning of grammatical structures without properly integrating or subsuming them in the grammar as a whole or in the previously learned cognitive structures. I doubt, however, that the need for developing new materials, as suggested by T. Grant Brown, is as great as the need for making the best use of existing ones.

As a basis for demonstrating the type of question-asking procedure I have in mind I have purposely chosen an excerpt from a text which some students and teachers who do not use this procedure find dull or even childish for use with college students, but which some of my colleagues and I have used with considerable success and favorable reaction from the students.[5] Sutter (Goedsche & Glaettli 1963) is a graded reader designed more or less as companion to the first half of Deutsch für Amerikaner (Goedsche & Spann 1964), a rather traditional grammar text which is meant to be used over two terms. The first half of the grammar text is chiefly concerned with a presentation of the simple noun phrase and the associated categories of case, gender and number, but it also includes the forms of the present tense, the modals, imperative and some information on word order. Sutter, intended to be introduced in about the third week of instruction, is thus written in the present tense and, for the most part, in very simple German, which makes it quite suitable for testing and reinforcing by means of appropriate questions the students' knowledge of the grammatical concepts that are introduced in the first part of the grammar (or any similarly constructed text).

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The passage below is taken verbatim from the first two pages of Sutter. Some of the questions following this passage are obviously too difficult for the beginning of the third week but are nevertheless included here to illustrate the tremendous number of different kinds of questions that can be constructed on the basis of a very small piece of text; none is too difficult for the first year and most could be handled in the first term. They are meant to be open-book questions with specific reference to page and line number so that the teacher can request minor details without demanding prior memorization of vocabulary and insignificant facts of content.

Johann August Sutter kommt aus Kandern in Süddeutschland. Im Jahre 1833 wohnt er mit seiner Frau und vier Kindern in einer kleinen Stadt in der Schweiz. Die Stadt heißt Burgdorf. Er ist dreißig Jahre alt und hat ein Geschäft. Er verkauft Kleider, aber er verdient nicht viel Geld. Eines Tages hat er gar kein Geld mehr. Er muß sein Geschäft verkaufen. Da sagt er zu seiner Frau und seinen Kindern:

"Ich bin arm und kann euch nicht mehr helfen. Ich muß das Land verlassen. Ich fahre nach Amerika. Auf Wiedersehen, Gott weiß wann!"

Er packt seine wenigen Sachen und fährt nach Paris. Dann fährt er ans Meer und wartet auf ein Schiff.

(1) line 1-2: Woher kommt Sutter?
(2) line 2-3: In welchem Jahrhundert lebt er?
(3) line 1-2: Wo ist Kandern?
(4) line 2-4: Wann wohnt Sutter in der Schweiz?
(5) line 2-3: Wer wohnt mit Sutter zusammen?
(6) line 3: Wie viele Kinder hat Sutter?
(7) line 4-5: Wie heißt Sutters Heimatstadt?
(8) line 3: Was für eine Stadt ist Burgdorf?
(9) line 4: Wer wohnt dort?
(10) line 5: Wer ist dreißig Jahre alt?
(11) line 5-6: Wo arbeitet Sutter?
or: Wo verkauft Sutter Kleider?

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(12) line 7-8 : Warum muß er sein Geschäft verkaufen?
(13) line 9-10: Mit wem spricht Sutter?
(14) line 11-12: Wem kann er nicht mehr helfen?
(15) line 11: Warum kann er ihnen nicht mehr helfen?
(16) line 12: Welches Land muß Sutter verlassen?
(17) line 12-13: Wohin fährt er?
or: Wohin will er fahren?
(18) line 16-17: Wo wartet Sutter?
(19) line 16-17: Womit will er nach Amerika fahren?

A glance at the above questions shows that they are introduced by question words which are significantly different in no less than fifteen of the nineteen examples. Because of the rather complex inflectional system of German and its extensive use of the so-called da- and wo-compounds (womit, damit, etc.) there are many more that a student needs to know in order to communicate effectively in ordinary everyday conversation. But it would of course be inadvisable to introduce them all at once. A systematic approach would probably suggest that the instructor begin by explaining that the (surface) structure of German is very sensitive to direction in a way that somewhat resembles the language of Shakespeare or the archaic language still used frequently in contemporary English legal documents. Thus in English it is possible to use the simple form "where" in all three of the following sentences (instead of the older "where, whither, whence"), but the wo in German must be accompanied by a "directional signal" whenever it does not mean "where at".

Where do you live (at)? = Wo wohnst du?
Where are you going (to)? = Wohin gehst du?
Where did you get that (from)? = Woher hast du das?

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The particles in parentheses are optional in contemporary English, but they are cognitively present even if they do not appear in the surface representation.

At least this much structural information should and can easily be established before reading begins. Once the student sees the importance of the semantics and syntax of these question words in ordinary conversation (which incidentally involves a great deal of questioning and answering by speaker and hearer) he is ready to expand his repertoire to other space-oriented forms (worauf, woran, etc.) as well as to those that are oriented toward time (e.g. wann), manner (e.g. wie, was für ein) quantification (e.g. wieviel), etc.

Some specific observations need to be made in reference to the above questions. Very few of the questions can be answered by simply picking a whole sentence or phrase out of the text without performing some sort of transformation, even though most of the syntactic information needed is contained in the question and in the lines of text referred to. Thus the students not only have to listen carefully in order to pick just the right question word out of the many possibilities, but they also have to create new sentences. Once they discover how much is actually demanded of them, they are less inclined to consider the questions trite or uninteresting. An instructor who concentrates on this approach will usually forget, or at least disregard, the fact that Sutter, for example, is not an

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inspiring piece of great literature or perhaps not even very exciting to read for its own sake.

Thirty to fifty questions of this type can be asked in a twenty to thirty minute period, so that every student gets a chance to respond several times during each class period. The active participation of each student can be even further increased if the class as a whole is strongly encouraged to silently verbalize an answer to every question. After all, in regard to the actual production of sentences, the chief difference between a silent and a spoken answer involves only the pronounciation, which is, of course, only a very small aspect of any natural language.

To help the students internalize the entire rather complex inflectional system of the noun phrase, it is essential that the teacher construct numerous questions like (5), (6), (8), (12), (14), (18) and (19), to which the answers require inflectional endings different from those in the text. In this way the students get a chance to put to use in their own creations the paradigms and patterns presented in the grammar text and they come to realize that rote memorization is of little value by itself. To some teachers this approach may seem to put undue emphasis on morphology, but it should be considered as a device for illustrating, among other things, that case markers (prepositions and inflectional endings) indicate the syntactic and semantic relationships of the nouns and verbs.

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Since it is difficult for most students (even if they have learned the essential forms or paradigms and grasped their relationships) to make the transition from textbook exercises to the creation of sentences, it might be advisable, especially in the beginning, for the instructor to encourage incomplete responses which nevertheless contain the essential information. Thus to question (11) the teacher could accept Geschäft or im Geschäft; to (14) Frau or seiner Frau should be sufficient; Amerika or nach Amerika adequately answers (17), and so on. In a sense this approach is closer to the actual use of language by native speakers, since we very frequently delete that part of our answer which is a repetition of the question or is otherwise recoverable from it (e.g. the English equivalent of (17) "Where is he going?" Acceptable response: "to America"). If desirable the teacher can then expand the statement to its full form or request it from one of the better prepared students. Some excellent discussion relating to this topic can be found in recent literature on second language acquisition (See especially Cook 1969; Corder 1967; Holley and King 1971).

In general, it seems advisable to postpone questions like (12) and (15) until embedded clauses are introduced in a systematic way, for just as in his native language the student will be inclined to use conjunctions and dependent clauses in answer to questions beginning with "why". This may be a difficult adjustment for some teachers to make, since why-questions are so frequently used in most of the courses they

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have taken themselves as well as in the sets of questions which accompany most readers. For this reason some instructors might prefer to establish a convention that would allow (or even prescribe) the following answers as appropriate for (12) and (15), respectively: "Er hat kein Geld mehr." and "Er ist arm." This practice also frequently provides a way for the instructor to check the students' understanding of the meaning of the passage while simultaneously requiring them to make some grammatical changes (e.g. in (12): a permutation of hat and er; in (15): a substitution of er for ich and of ist for bin).

It is rather surprising how soon most students learn to read the assigned material well enough so that they scarcely need more than an occasional glance at the text when responding. If the questions are fired in rapid succession the students will not have time to write down the answers, so that most of the same questions can be used again on the weekly quizzes - again with the books open. This is perhaps not the place to discuss testing, but I find that the students' grasp of grammar and their ability to read can also be tested fairly well be means of applying the questioning technique sketched above to sight passages.

Space does not permit an extensive discussion of other types of questions which can be asked, especially in the second and third terms, but the procedure is essentially an extension of the basic principle discussed above. The reader I will have reference to for use in the second term is Steuben (Goedsche

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and Glaettli 1963), which is a biographical narrative told mostly in the simple past tense but with a considerable amount of conversation in the present tense. On the basis of this text the instructor can ask numerous questions in the present perfect for review and practice and at the same time help to internalize in the students' nascent grammar of German the fact that this past tense form is the normal one for conversational purposes. In addition, the students need to learn how the Germans handle the concept of time by means of various time adverbials and tense forms. An excellent discussion of this topic can be found in Schipporeit and Strothmann 1970 and Barnes 1974.

Following are a few examples of the types of questions which can serve to teach the semantics of tense and time adverbials in German:

(20) Wann ist Steuben nach Amerika gekommen?
(21) Seit wann wohnt er dort?
(22) Wann hat er Deutschland verlassen?
(23) Wie lange wohnt er schon in Amerika?
(24) Wie lange hat er in Deutschland gewohnt?

Interference from the structure of English seems to be at least a partial cause of the difficulty in the learning of the use of the tense forms. Thus (20), (22) and (24) would be in the simple past in English as opposed to the present perfect in German. But (21) and (23) have present in German for present perfect in English. The students need a good deal of practice with questions like these before they can thoroughly internalize the tense system, even though most of its subtleties may be cognitively grasped rather quickly.

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There are, of course, many more grammatical concepts that need to be covered by the grammar and questions on reading. The relationship of the active, passive and man-constructions can be shown by using the passive in a question that relates to the active in the text, etc. Even practice in the use of the counter-factual subjunctive can be taught by means of questions such as the following:

(25) Wo wäre Steuben geblieben, wenn er nicht nach Amerika gefahren wäre?

In the second term why-questions can require answers with dependent clauses introduced with damit and um ... zu, etc. Such questions allow for the practice in the transportation of the verb and its transformation from a finite to an infinitive form and the construction of dependent or embedded sentences.

It is possible to begin already in the second term a type of questioning which should be used with greater frequency on the intermediate level. Following are two small pieces of text together with suggested questions:

Natürlich war er glücklich über diese Ernennung. (Steuben, p. 24)
(26) Worüber freute er sich?

Der Baron versuchte nun, die wenigen Truppen zur Verteidigung der Hauptstadt zu organisieren. (Steuben, p. 29)
(27) Was sollten die Truppen verteidigen?

Both (26) and (27) involve a kind of paraphrasing that is a very natural property of language which a native speaker must necessarily control but the use of which does not come naturally to the second language learner. The answer to (26) requires

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the verb sich freuen as a synonym of glücklich sein, and (27) requires a transform of a noun phrase into a verb phrase. Especially since few textbooks contain exercises illustrating such relationships, this type of question should be used frequently in the third and fourth terms.

If the procedure sketched above is carefully and systematically carried out in the elementary courses it is possible to devote more time in the intermediate courses to the type of question last mentioned, to begin genuine discussion of the content and even to entertain voluntary attempts at interpretation in the manner suggested by Hankins 1972. But because it so often happens that some students come to the intermediate level from previous classes where not enough pertinent questions were asked, and because most classes have students with varying ability, it is usually necessary to construct many very simple questions at the beginning of each term. These can and should be interspersed with more challenging ones for the better prepared students.

If very short stories are used for the most part in the third term the students can be assigned an entire story before it is discussed in class. Then much of the first period on each story can be given over to basic information questions using a great variety of simple question words, so that the essential content of the story can be brought out. During the next couple class periods the questioning can again proceed line by line as suggested above. This approach assures that each story will be read at least twice and also gives those students with a literary

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bent a chance to read and discuss the story in terms of its literary value (insofar as they are capable). At the same time the students' knowledge of the grammar can be reinforced and reviewed where necessary by means of appropriate questions related to specific points of grammar. If the students are further assigned to write a short Nacherzählung (or for those who have the ability and who feel so inclined, a critique, comparison or interpretation), the story will need to be read at least three times.

I would advocate basically the same approach for the fourth term, in which case the questions could more frequently deal with discussion topics and more complicated structures and greater semantic subtleties. But even at this level the content should not be the main emphasis. For if too much knowledge of the content is demanded before the grammar is sufficiently internalized students tend to resort to memorization in their native language.

It has recently been suggested (cf. Corder 1971, Nemser 1972, Selinker 1972) that there may very well be specific stages of second language acquisition which parallel to some extent those which seem to exist in first language acquisition. If this is true, and research can discover these stages, it would be relatively easy to construct sets of questions for each point along the way. The approach I have rather sketchily outlined above would be very well suited to a systematic program which took into account the various stages of language learning, but it is also quite appropriate in any classroom where the students

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are expected to gain some knowledge of the use of the foreign language as a means of normal oral communication.

True conversation requires question-asking by both speaker and hearer for interaction to take place. My presentation has viewed the student mostly as a hearer responding to the speaker's inquiries. The next step, getting the student to ask questions, is more difficult. I have experimented, with varied success, with having the students write questions and answers as well as orally quizzing the class on selected passages and stories. But the results are not yet satisfactory and require more experimentation and research. The problem of selecting the kinds of reading material most suitable for elicitation of the desired responses also needs to be carefully examined. It might eventually be possible to construct handbooks which would describe and list such types of materials, the best question-asking procedure for the various foreign languages, and effective means for getting students to construct their own questions. It is my hope that this paper will encourage others to work in these areas.

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Footnotes

[1]It is quite possible that foreign language teachers have underestimated the students' interest in learning to speak. For the past five years I have conducted a simple poll in the ten beginning and intermediate classes I have taught, with the result that in every instance more than 75% of the students stated that their main interest in studying a foreign language was in learning to speak it. Even those few potential majors with a strong interest in the Literature of German gave high priority to the spoken language.

[2]Although he offers a different solution, Vester (1974) clearly demonstrates the difficulties that students have with texts containing too much new vocabulary. His technique could also be used to show the problems caused by syntactic structure that is too difficult.

[3]Nelson (1974) makes an excellent case for the teaching of the beginning and intermediate courses as an end in itself rather than simply as a means to the more advanced courses, as is unfortunately so often done.

[4]Seliger (1972) discusses this problem in some detail and suggests some very interesting ways to develop "continued discourse" on the intermediate level, but he seems to assume with most other teachers that the actual creation of novel sentences cannot be started before then. The procedure presented in this paper could perhaps serve as a bridge to his method of developing continued discourse.

[5]Although this matter warrants more discussion, I will simply note here that I find the texts for my purposes to be those which contain a good deal of action and relatively little description, which unfortunately (perhaps) excludes most of the cultural readers available.

[6]This is a revised version of a paper previously entitled, "The Use of Questions in Foreign Language Teaching", which was read at the Mountain Interstate Foreign Language Conference, held at Furman University, October, 1972.

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